

The Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany, Year C, 2010

Luke 5: 1-11

The Rev. Ronald N. Johnson

In today's gospel reading, Saint Luke tells us a fishing story. Let me retell it, quickly, and put it in chronological context. This is the story of Jesus calling his first four disciples, so it is early in his ministry. Nonetheless, Jesus had already built something of a reputation. Now, the sequence of this story in Luke's gospel is confusing, but Luke was not a first-hand witness and he tended to get his chronology messed up from time to time. But to tell this, as Luke tells it, the Lord already had quite a reputation as a teacher, preacher and healer, perhaps exaggerated on Luke's part, so when he came down to the shore at Lake Gennesaret, Luke describes a large crowd gathered to hear Jesus, a large-enough crowd to really press the Lord. So Jesus did a smart thing. He hailed the owner of a boat anchored near the shore, boarded the boat and had the skipper stand off a few feet from the shore. Jesus could address the crowd, but the water gave him some protective separation from them.

Now it happened that the boat's owner was a fisherman named Simon, and when he finished preaching, Jesus told Simon, later called Peter, and we assume Andrew, his brother, but we are not told this, to move to deeper water and put out their nets. They did as told and got the catch of their lifetime. So did the brothers James and John, their fishing partners in the second boat. This minor miracle was convincing and Simon and Andrew, James and John became disciples. End of story.

The question for us is what meaning does this story carry? Early Christians would have taken comfort from the miraculous fish catch. To them, the story said that Christ cares about those who have faith in him and trust him and he takes care of their needs. This is usually the way that this story is interpreted, and I have no problem with it, except that I think it superficial, and the greater meaning is in the calling of the disciples. Christ saw, in them, capabilities far beyond what their station in life would suggest. He also saw in them great strength of character. He sensed that these men could hear and grasp his message that God loves humanity above all else, and that God's redeeming love, expressed in the gift of our Lord's sacrifice, invites us to an eternal presence in the family of God. Grasping that message, these disciples could then take it to all the corners of the earth.

This is especially powerful when we think about Simon Peter, who became, if you will, the chief disciple. Peter was the one all the others looked up to. In the days following the Resurrection, when Jesus was no longer physically present, Peter stood first among the apostles and to a very large extent, Peter called the shots. It was by Peter's guidance and direction that the Church grew as it did, and this was especially so after Peter moved to Rome. Peter became the first bishop of Rome, the first Pope in Roman Catholic understanding. We need to remember the moment when the Lord's faith and confidence in Peter dramatically bore fruit. Jesus asked his disciples, all of them, "Who am I?" Only Peter could answer, or dared to answer, "You are the Christ, the Messiah. You are

the son of God.” Jesus said, “And I say, you are Peter.” That was a play on the Aramaic word for “rock,” which through the English transliteration of the Greek comes to us as Peter. “You are Peter, and upon this rock I build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”

Teaching point: Christ sees his disciples as they are, and by our baptism we are his disciples. Christ sees us with all our flaws and all our blemishes and accepts us even so. But more than our flaws and blemishes, Christ sees our potential, what we can be, what we can do, what we can offer as disciples and he calls us and challenges us to take up his Cross and do his work in this world. And when we do it, we follow in the footsteps of Peter, and of Andrew and James and John and St. Paul and all those who have gone before us as soldiers of the Cross, as disciples of the Master. When we do the work that Christ has given us to do, as his disciples, we, too, build his Church, his Kingdom and the gates of hell shall never prevail against it. *Amen.*